

Employment

Occupational therapy assistants and aides held 19,000 jobs in 1998. About 4 out of 10 assistants and aides worked in offices of occupational therapists; and about 3 out of 10 worked in hospitals. The remainder worked primarily in nursing and personal care facilities, offices and clinics of physicians, social services agencies, outpatient rehabilitation centers, and home health agencies.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Persons must complete an associate's degree or certificate program from an accredited community college or technical school to qualify for occupational therapy assistant jobs. In contrast, occupational therapy aides usually receive most of their training on the job.

There were 165 accredited occupational therapy assistant programs in the United States in 1999. The first year of study typically involves an introduction to healthcare, basic medical terminology, anatomy, and physiology. In the second year, courses are more rigorous and usually include occupational therapy courses in areas such as mental health, gerontology, and pediatrics. Students must also complete supervised fieldwork in a clinic or community setting. Applicants to occupational therapy assistant programs can improve their chances of admission by taking high school courses in biology and health and by performing volunteer work in nursing homes, occupational or physical therapist's offices, or elsewhere in the healthcare field.

Occupational therapy assistants are regulated in most States, and must pass a national certification examination after they graduate. Those who pass the test are awarded the title of certified occupational therapy assistant.

Occupational therapy aides usually receive most of their training on the job. Qualified applicants must have a high school diploma, strong interpersonal skills, and a desire to help people in need. Applicants may increase their chances of getting a job by volunteering their services, thus displaying initiative and aptitude to the employer.

Assistants and aides must be responsible, patient, and willing to take directions and work as part of a team. Furthermore, they should be caring and want to help people who are not able to help themselves.

Job Outlook

Employment of occupational therapy assistants and aides is expected to grow much faster than the average for all occupations through 2008. Growth will result from an aging population, including the baby-boom cohort, which will probably need substantial occupational therapy services. Demand will also result from advances in medicine that allow more people with critical problems to survive and then need rehabilitative therapy.

Employment growth would be even faster, except for Federal legislation imposing limits on reimbursement for therapy services. However, at the same time, third-party payers, concerned with rising health care costs are beginning to encourage occupational therapists to delegate more of the hands-on therapy work to occupational therapy assistants and aides. By having assistants and aides work more closely with clients under the guidance of a therapist, the cost of therapy should be more modest than otherwise.

Earnings

Median annual earnings of occupational therapy assistants and aides were \$28,690 in 1998. The middle 50 percent earned between \$20,050 and \$36,900 a year. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$15,000 and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$45,740 a year. Median annual earnings of occupational therapy assistants and aides in 1997 were \$32,200 in offices of other health care practitioners and \$27,000 in hospitals.

Related Occupations

Occupational therapy assistants and aides work under the direction of occupational therapists. Other occupations in the healthcare field that work under the supervision of professionals include dental assistants, medical assistants, optometric assistants, pharmacy assistants, and physical therapy assistants and aides.

Sources of Additional Information

Information on a career as an occupational therapy assistant and a list of accredited programs can be obtained by sending a self-addressed label and \$5.00 to:

✉ The American Occupational Therapy Association, 4720 Montgomery Ln., P.O. Box 31220, Bethesda, MD 20824-1220.

Internet: <http://www.aota.org>

Physical Therapist Assistants and Aides

(O*NET 66017)

Significant Points

- Employment is projected to increase over the 1998-2008 period, but due to the effects of Federal limits on reimbursement for therapy services, the majority of expected employment growth is expected to occur during the second half of the projection period.
- Most licensed physical therapist assistants have an associate's degree, but physical therapist aides usually learn skills on the job.
- Two-thirds of jobs for physical therapist assistants and aides were in hospitals or offices of physical therapists.

Nature of the Work

Physical therapist assistants and aides perform components of physical therapy procedures and related tasks selected and delegated by a supervising physical therapist. These workers assist physical therapists in providing services that help improve mobility, relieve pain, and prevent or limit permanent physical disabilities of patients suffering from injuries or disease. Patients include accident victims and individuals with disabling conditions, such as low back pain, arthritis, heart disease, fractures, head injuries, and cerebral palsy.

Physical therapist assistants perform a variety of tasks. Treatment procedures delegated to these workers, under the direction of therapists, involve exercises, massages, electrical stimulation, paraffin baths, hot and cold packs, traction, and ultrasound. Physical therapist assistants record the patient's responses to treatment and report to the physical therapist the outcome of each treatment.

Physical therapist aides help make therapy sessions productive, under the direct supervision of a physical therapist or physical therapist assistant. They are usually responsible for keeping the treatment area clean and organized and preparing for each patient's therapy. When patients need assistance moving to or from a treatment area, aides push them in a wheelchair, or provide them with a shoulder to lean on. Because they are not licensed, aides perform a more limited range of tasks than physical therapist assistants do.

The duties of aides include some clerical tasks, such as ordering depleted supplies, answering the phone, and filling out insurance forms and other paperwork. The extent to which an aide or an assistant performs clerical tasks depends on the size and location of the facility.

Working Conditions

The hours and days that physical therapist assistants and aides work vary, depending on the facility and whether they are full or part-time employees. Many outpatient physical therapy offices and clinics have evening and weekend hours, to help coincide with patients' personal schedules.

Physical therapist assistants and aides need to have a moderate degree of strength, due to the physical exertion required in assisting

patients with their treatment. For example, in some cases, assistants and aides need to help lift patients. Additionally, constant kneeling, stooping, and standing for long periods are all part of the job.

Employment

Physical therapist assistants and aides held 82,000 jobs in 1998. They work alongside physical therapists in a variety of settings. Over two-thirds of all assistants and aides work in hospitals or offices of physical therapists. Others work in nursing and personal care facilities, outpatient rehabilitation centers, offices and clinics of physicians, and home health agencies.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Physical therapist aides are trained on the job, but physical therapist assistants typically have earned an associate's degree from an accredited physical therapist assistant program. As of January 1997, 44 States and Puerto Rico regulated assistants. Additional requirements include certification in CPR and other first aid and a minimum number of hours of clinical experience.

According to the American Physical Therapy Association, there were 274 accredited physical therapist assistant programs in the United States as of 1999. Accredited physical therapist assistant programs are designed to last 2 years, or four semesters, and culminate in an associate's degree. Admission into physical therapist assistant programs is competitive, and

it is not unusual for colleges to have long waiting lists of prospective candidates. Programs are divided into academic study and hands on clinical experience. Academic coursework includes algebra, anatomy and physiology, biology, chemistry, and psychology. Before students begin their clinical field experience, many programs require that they complete a semester of anatomy and physiology and have certifications in CPR and other first aid. Both educators and prospective employers view clinical experience as an integral part of ensuring that students understand the responsibilities of a physical therapist assistant.

Employers typically require physical therapist aides to have a high school diploma, strong interpersonal skills, and a desire to assist people in need. Most employers provide clinical on-the-job training.

Job Outlook

Employment of physical therapist assistants and aides is expected to grow much faster than the average through the year 2008. However, Federal legislation imposing limits on reimbursement for therapy services may continue to adversely affect the job market for physical therapist assistants and aides in the near term. Because of the effects of these provisions, the majority of expected employment growth for physical therapist assistants and aides is expected to occur in the second half of the projection period.

Over the long run, demand for physical therapist assistants and aides will continue to rise, with growth in the number of individuals with disabilities or limited function. The rapidly growing elderly population is particularly vulnerable to chronic and debilitating conditions that require therapeutic services. These patients often need additional assistance in their treatment, making the roles of assistants and aides vital. The large baby-boom generation is entering the prime age for heart attacks and strokes, further increasing the demand for cardiac and physical rehabilitation. Additionally, future medical developments should permit an increased percentage of trauma victims to survive, creating added demand for therapy services.

Licensed physical therapist assistants can enhance the cost-effective provision of physical therapy services. Once a patient is evaluated, and a treatment plan is designed by the physical therapist, the physical therapist assistant can provide many aspects of treatment, as prescribed by the therapist.

Earnings

Median annual earnings of physical therapist assistants and aides were \$21,870 in 1998. The middle 50 percent earned between \$16,700 and \$31,260 a year. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$13,760 and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$39,730 a year. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest number of physical therapist assistants and aides in 1997 were as follows:

Hospitals	\$21,200
Offices of other health care practitioners	20,700
Nursing and personal care facilities	19,200

Related Occupations

Physical therapist assistants and aides work under the supervision of physical therapists. Other assistants and aides in the health care field that work under the supervision of professionals include dental, medical, occupational therapy, optometric, podiatric, recreational therapy, and pharmacy assistants.

Sources of Additional Information

Information on a career as a physical therapist assistant and a list of schools offering accredited programs can be obtained from:

➤ The American Physical Therapy Association, 1111 North Fairfax Street, Alexandria, VA 22314-1488. Internet: <http://www.apta.org>



A physical therapy aide prepares a pack for moist heat therapy.